Two Conceptions of Taste

Taste is difficult to define and even harder to justify, so let us just take it for granted for a moment. (Alright, for those who don't get the picture, here's a quick attempt: taste is the ability to create elegance. The people who made the iPod clearly have taste; the people who made Windows do not.) Unfortunately for me, it seems like a lot of people in the US don't have much taste. (Try watching the infographics on the network evening news, for example.) But even among people who have taste, I've noticed there are two kinds: positive and negative.

Negative taste is the ability to tell when something is bad. Positive taste is the ability to make something that is good. Indeed, one might even say that there is only one kind of taste and positive taste is simply negative taste plus skills. But since taste is generally inferred from creations, it's probably simpler to treat them as two different things.

People with negative taste can make things that look really nice, but they also look very plain. I think the founders of Google have negative taste. John Gruber, as far as I can tell, mostly does. Same with Paul Graham. (As do I, for that matter.) People with negative taste make things by trying something very simple and then stripping away pieces until it looks good. They can detect goodness, but not create it, so they're limited to designs with very few variables, because then they can go thru all the options and pick out the ones that look OK.

People with positive taste, on the other hand, can make things that genuinely look good. This gives them a lot more freedom in their designs (they can use colors other than white!). Truly good designers have positive taste. Unfortunately for people like us, Apple seems to have hired most of them and put them to work building fairly bland web sites.

Of course, taste applies to far more fields than design. One could apply the same idea to writing. Positive taste writers can write beautiful flowing prose that looks you in. Negative taste writers can only write beautiful things by staying simple.

People with negative taste can recognize people with positive taste and hire them. People with no taste, on the other hand, fail to see the difference, resulting in disasters like the graphic design department of American Airlines.

People with negative taste can also be critics, which brings us to Joe Clark's [famous comment](#) "Actually, no, it is not the responsibility of the critic to solve the problem. Pauline Kael was not expected to rewrite and redirect the films she disliked."

People with negative taste can pick out the bad movies. They just can't make great ones.

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